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Medicine and Literature: Doctors in Both Faculties*

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PROLOGUE

THERE is a land that never was but always will be, where are the poets and the writers of the world in their glorified bodies. Around them purl the waters of Helicon and above them soars that mountain. This is their never-never land, as Valhalla is for all the brave dead soldiers, as Fiddler's Green is for the Irish, and the Big Rock Candy Mountain is for the bums of all the world.

Strangely enough, on the slopes of Mount Helicon among the poets are to be found many doctors of medicine, not practicing their art of healing—for who wants healing in a glorified body?—but as members, one with another, of the company of poets, bards, and minstrels. For these great men, for all their stains or stethoscopes, are doctors in both faculties. They have shown themselves as doctors of letters as well as of medicine, themselves not least, but honored among the greatest writers of the world.

What tales they have told! Of Calvary and of cowboys, of the detective, the one great figure in English literature realized everywhere, more so even than Falstaff. It was a doctor of medicine who created Gargantua, the giant of our literature, and they have told more truly of artists in their way than any other writers. Among the professions only the practitioners of medicine can claim real space on Helicon and that is why Phoebus Apollo, the old Greek god, honors physicians and poets together.

This reflection begins in one of the round towers of Ireland. We used to believe that these were built before the dawn of history, before even the Scandinavians came to our shores to bedevil us, transmit into our wills their sins of whiskey drinking, gambling, and love of red-haired women. It must have been something of a shock to our early scholars to realize

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that these round towers had glass and iron and other modern conveniences built into them, but this they no doubt credited to the genius of the ancient Irish race. All through the nineteenth century in the poetry of Davis, the orations of McGee, you will find the round tower always, with the wolf hound and the shamrock and the harp, and now they are on the flags and the coins and the stamps of the red-necked New Republic. The native Irish knew little or nothing about these towers because they were built by the English, their masters, to repel the Napoleonic invasion that threatened them for the twenty-five years preceding Trafalgar. The Irish have a song about it, *Killaloe*:

I remember I was born
 At the time they cut the corn
 Quite contagious to the town of Killaloe
 And a French Monsieur he came
 To instruct us in the game
 And to teach us all the art of parley voo
 You can talk about ecarté
 The French for Bonaparté
 And any other party that
 Comment vous—partez vous
 We learned to sing it aisy
 The song The Marsallaisy
 Vouslons! Toulon! The continong
 We lost at Killaloe.

The round towers known as Martello towers, after the man who designed them, and were never used because Napoleon never came near the shores of Ireland, except for a serio-comic attempted landing that the song tells of. The towers lay empty and abandoned for more than a century, their windows facing blindly over the Irish Sea, until one of them became occupied fifty years ago by a pair of would-be Doctors of Medicine. The world of letters and of healing has never been the same since. The first and lesser of these was Oliver St. John Gogarty, who graduated with honors from the medical schools of Dublin, Oxford, and Vienna. He became a famous neurosurgeon, a senator of the Irish Free State, an olympic athlete, and most of all, as far as he was concerned, a writer of quality in prose and poetry with a stake in the groves around Helicon, and there he is today for sure.

His books on medical education are a joy to read and unlike anything that I had ever read before. They are comparable in English, or indeed in any language, only to Dickens and Fielding with the lid off, or to the writings of J. P. Donleavy, the Irish American gingerman. They are *Tumbling in the Hay* and *As I was Walking Down Sackville Street*. They are warm, gamy, spicy and callous. Only today has a new young writer, a

doctor of medicine equalled or surpassed him, but more of that later. I was reading in the Mayo Library *Clinical Studies in Neurology* by Harry Lee Parker purely by chance and he is so like Gogarty that he can serve as an introduction and still remain in medicine. His essays in *Clinical Studies* have really sugared the pill of medical learning.

But to get back to Gogarty. He describes the society of medical students as I knew it in my youth and wish to know it in my middle age. The University of Wales was just around the corner from the Welsh National School of Medicine and I must say that all the irreverence and wildness traditionally associated with medical students on their larks was born out by my experience. One of the first short stories I ever wrote, or that brought me any fame, was based upon a love affair of mine with a student there, Angharad. The situation around the medical school was far more roistering and more favored than is its state over here (it always amuses and saddens me to see the young doctors and interns at our medical schools and hospitals in their white coats bowing to one another and larding every sentence with the salutation word *Doctor* like a bunch of babus.) Over there in Britain, then as now, medical schools have great rugby teams, and their carousing after victory, or defeat for that matter, is Bacchanalian and Dionysian, alas. Certainly their learning over there is much more casual and humane than is the American—less hygienic, less detailed, more medieval. They are less on their dignity, less conservative, less conforming, with more of a humane education. Gogarty is a fair sample of the old style of them. His work as a surgeon won him a great reputation and wealth, but he was far more proud of the fact that his friend William Yeats included several of his poems in the great hall of fame, the *Oxford Book of Modern English Verse*. Like any physician, like any man, he was concerned with death and the fear of it, and did what he could to allay it with his scalpel in one hand and his pen in the other. Listen to what his hand and heart write while the other hand and mind may probe and sever.

Per Iter Tenebricosum

Enough! Why should a man bemoan
A Fate that leads the natural way?
Or think himself a worthier one
Than those who braved it in their day?
If only gladiators died,
Or heroes, Death would be his pride;
But have not little maidens gone,
And Lesbia's sparrow all alone?

But more than his poetry, more than his prose, and they are both considerable, although he was not as good a writer as silly Willy Yeats averred, more than his fame as a politician and athlete, even more than his pride as

a surgeon, was the fear that beset him, encompassed him, that his companion who failed his examinations for Doctor of Medicine would immortalize him cruelly in his writing, would pin him to the literary wall for all time. And so he did, for his companion who failed his medical exams especially in chemistry, in Dublin, in Paris, and then back again in Dublin, was James Joyce, who lived in that round tower with the other medical student for a while, and then left its confines and the compass of Ireland and the study of medicine to leap into the world of literature where his only peers are with Homer, Shakespeare, and Dante. He saw through Gogarty for the man he was, his gross irreverence and blasphemy, his snobism which came out of him in foul puffs, and he impaled him forever as Buck Mulligan in his great book *Ulysses*. Gogarty shared with Joyce from their early days together a belief in Joyce's immortality. A thing that Gogarty never overcame or forgot: perplexed to find his trivial name reared by Joyce to lasting fame, he, indeed, spent the end of his life in this country, going from campus to campus giving convocations on James Joyce, denying his virtue as a writer. He lived on him in his old age, as have many scholars battered, with their dissertations, articles, biographies, and letters. I heard Gogarty several times speak so, and as a neurosurgeon he would point out that Joyce was odd, else he could not have written *Ulysses* wherein Gogarty appears as pitiful and as contemptible a figure as Pistol, Bardolph, and Nym, for all his braggadocio. Joyce all his life was concerned with doctors of medicine. He grew up and roistered with them when he was young; indeed, he blamed a drunken revel of his early Dublin time with the medical students for the ailment in his eyes which agonized him for nearly all the rest of his life. The mental illness of his daughter betrayed him into a touching faith into the efficacy of the current practice of medicine for a mind diseased. His daughter's mental breakdown came about just when wealth came to him in the late 1930's because of the acceptance of *Ulysses* by the critics and people, against the attempts by the Church and State, the Post Office, and the Police to ban or burn it as they previously had done with his first great book of stories, *Dubliners*.

Yet it was Gogarty himself who really began me on this lecture for he has written a book of essays called *Intimations*. Now, a book of essays is hard to get published anywhere in the world these days and it was with some interest I noticed that here and there throughout the essays Dr. Gogarty would come out strangely and strongly in all sorts of places in praise of whiskey, which he called "the champagne of the North." I wondered at this until I found out that his publisher was the Abelard Press which at that time was a subsidiary of Schenley's Distilleries. But one of his essays is about his round tower days with Joyce, and he mentions that to get himself over a bad time Joyce one day pawned his seventeenth century edition of the works of Paracelsus whom he called a doctor in both

faculties, for Paracelsus was Theophrastus Bombast von Hohenheim, who wrote *The Elixir of Life* and *The Philosopher's Stone*, who excoriated the earlier teaching of medicine, advanced the medical use of arsenic and opium. His doctrine of "cosmic medicine," to which we are returning in large measure today or tomorrow, he took from Celsus. He was a distinguished surgeon and writer as well, and this led me to thinking how many eminent writers were also surgeons from the Gospel-maker Luke the Evangelist through to Conan Doyle who created a character based upon his old teacher of anatomy at the Edinburgh University School of Medicine, who has become the most famous literary character in the world of English.

While we are on this phase of doctors in literature it is well to mention a third who, too, has been concerned with a universal character, the cowboy, *The Rider of the Purple Sage*. As well known in all his many guises as Sherlock Holmes in his, the cowboy of the West was largely created by a third doctor of medicine, of dental medicine granted, the New Yorker, Zane Grey.

Now when I consider, I find M.D.'s peeping at me from everywhere in the stacks of the library, far from the shelves of medical books. It is not stringing the bow of fancy too tightly to say that no other profession has wandered so long and so delightedly on the banks of Mount Helicon; indeed some of them have even reached the peak, where few men are and then only by the grace of God or, in earlier pagan days, by favor of Phoebus Apollo, who took under his wing thousands of years ago both doctors and poets. In those days they were one and the same man. Others are the druid bards, who held for the clan the tale of life and death.

While I was preparing this talk, and when I'm preparing a talk everybody in the Library knows about it, because they can hear me talking to myself through the walls of my office and they can get no sense out of me until it is done, one of them brought in a book on John Keats, as good a work on him as had appeared since Middleton Murray's great study of this most poetic of all poets. He is the only poet I know who can use the word Chapman and make it glorious, as he does when he sings for us all the wonder that can come with the discovery of a new form of the art of writing. Do you remember *On First Looking into Chapman's Homer*?

Much have I travell'd in the realms of gold,
And many goodly states and kingdoms seen;
Round many western islands have I been
Which bards in fealty to Apollo hold.
Oft of one wide expanse had I been told
That deep-brow'd Homer ruled as his demesne;
Yet did I never breathe its pure serene
Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold:
Then felt I like some watcher of the skies

When a new planet swims into his ken;
 Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes
 He stared at the Pacific—and all his men
 Look'd at each other with a wild surmise—
 Silent, upon a peak in Darien.

To most of us John Keats is the most poetic of all poets.

This book of Keats was written by a doctor of medicine, Dr. Walter Wells, published in 1959. Originally many of the chapters had appeared in *Laryngoscope*, a journal devoted to the diseases of nose, throat, and ear published in St. Louis, and I bet that is a first for any medical journal. Lest readers of this journal be surprised at reading of John Keats therein the author explains to his fellow physicians, "There is good ground to claim him as one of our own, we need only recall that he served four long years as apprentice to an apothecary—in those days an apothecary was a regular practitioner of medicine; and after that he spent a year and a half in the great Guy's Hospital school of medicine in London; that while at Guy's he had the exceptional experience of serving as assistant to one of the staff surgeons; and that he served for a term in the responsible position of hospital intern." When Doctor Wells became editor of *Laryngoscope* he wrote articles on Keats and so there you are, and later he collected them in a book, *A Doctor's Life of John Keats*.

There is in English literature a whole line of these doctors in both faculties, from the bucolic and gentle poet George Crabbe, through Noll Goldsmith, through that author of learned and metaphysical poetry, Dr. Robert Bridges. Robert Bridges was not only a distinguished scholar at Eton and Oxford but he walked the wards of St. Bart's Hospital in London and became the only doctor of medicine to be also Poet Laureate of England. His poem that as a doctor he composed after the death of a young child is very tender and moving; so is this love story.

I Heard A Linnet Courting

I heard a linnet courting
 His lady in the spring:
 His mates were idly sporting,
 Nor stayed to hear him sing
 His song of love.—
 I fear my speech distorting
 His tender love.
 The phrases of his pleading
 Were full of young delight;
 And she that gave him heeding
 Interpreted aright
 His gay, sweet notes,—
 So sadly marred in the reading,—
 His tender notes.

And when he ceased, the hearer
Awaited the refrain,
Till swiftly perching nearer
He sang his song again,
His pretty song:—
Would that my verse spake clearer
His tender song!

Ye happy, airy creatures!
That in the merry spring
Think not of what misfeatures
Or cares the year may bring;
But unto love
Resign your simple natures,
To tender love.

The Poet Laureate of England is the canary bird of the reigning king or queen; he should compose verses to honor state occasions. One of them, Alfred Austin, writing upon the well-nigh catastrophic illness of King Edward VII, which delayed his coronation, penned these memorable, so funny lines about the crowd that gathered to read the medical bulletin posted at the gates of Buckingham Palace, "Along the line the electric whispers came/He is not worse but very much the same."

Dr. Robert Bridges, alas, is winning a new fame for himself—notoriety perhaps is the better word. He was the confidant of Gerald Manley Hopkins, the Jesuit poet, and custodian of his papers. It is with growing dismay and suspicion that critics are realizing that the reason, perhaps, that he held on to the poems before publishing them was to benefit his own verse. There is something mannered, delicate, and Victorian about the poetry of Robert Bridges; his *Testament of Beauty* is a classic work. Far from his manner and mode is that distinguished American and physician, William Carlos Williams, a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania Medical School, the general practitioner of Rutherford, New Jersey, whose poems especially, but his essays, stories, and memoir too, are examples of high poetic art. He is a rebel, as any poet must be, against the times we are living in, but a rebel always in good standing, although I often wonder what the American Medical Association must think of this eagle in their midst. Doctors in general, like all of us, tend to be too conformist and concerned too much with themselves, too little with their role as men of this Republic.

The greatest of all the doctors in both faculties, however, is far in the past and we have to go back through the centuries to the Middle Ages to find, before the medical man and scientist of genius, Roger Bacon, the great doctor, Rabelais. He pranced and capered his way through the Middle Ages and became a lamp of laughter for all time, never needed more than today. He loved to air his knowledge of anatomy, such as it was, as

his description of the birth of Gargantua witnesses. "The cotyledons of her matrix were all loosened above, through which the child sprung up and leaped, and so entering into the vena cava did climb by the diaphragm even above her shoulders (where that vein divides itself into two) and, from thence taking his way towards the left side, issued forth at her left ear." All through his work are evidences of his pride in his medical background. He was not only a great comic writer himself, perhaps the greatest of all, but the cause of comedy in other men. Balzac roared like him, Dean Swift copied from him, and although none of us read Rabelais anymore, anymore than we read Don Quixote, or The Song of Roland, it does not matter; he is with us still somewhere in our mind and heart to help us against the pedants and the princes of this world, to help us grin whenever pomp and circumstance surround us and solemnify our ways. I think there should be a picture of this burly monk up everywhere for his brother medicos to see, with some of his aphorisms tatooed on their wrists for, I repeat, he is the greatest of all the doctors in both faculties.

One of the first and best American men of letters graduated in medicine from Harvard, Oliver Wendell Holmes, *The Autocrat at the Breakfast Table*. And one of the most endearing books of memoir that I have ever read, *R.S. As I Remember Him*, was written by another American physician, Hans Zinsser, who also wrote that best seller, now pocket book, on the history of plague, *Rats, Lice and History*. His stories about how as a young militiaman in New York he was told to escort on horseback Teddy Roosevelt is comic writing of the first order, as is also his story of the dwindling of the turtles in Paris. *R.S.* is a basic book of memoir to which you return again and again.

Conan Doyle is becoming almost as well known a character through the biographical writing of Pearson and Carr and the literary effusions of the Baker Street Irregulars; his fame is rising to match that of his creation of Sherlock Holmes. Far below them in stature, but still famous enough, is the bloodcurdling and drinking ghoul, *Dracula*. This book was written by Bram Stoker, a Dublin Doctor of Medicine, and from the same land also came Charles Lever, who wrote a series of novels that were not only entertaining in themselves, but started a new pattern of fiction writing, coming into its culmination in the works of Somerville and Ross. Stoker and Lever both practiced medicine in rural Ireland whence came the most lovable of all these double doctors, Oliver Goldsmith, whose *Vicar of Wakefield* and *Deserted Village* have won him such fame that his medical career tends to be forgotten—and in all charity for the dear man it does seem that the less said about his practice of medicine the better.

It is very hard to find doctors who will write about themselves in creative fashion, any more than professors will, or any others. The doctor in fiction

tends to become as much in prototype as a college dean, or a prostitute with a heart of gold. On the film he's always asking for cans of boiling water; the frontier doctor is always someone rather drunk and disreputable like Thomas Mitchell in "Stage Coach" or that nice little man in TV's "Gun-smoke." They may have forgotten all they ever knew about medicine but they always call for hot water and black coffee. A. J. Cronin, however, a doctor who forsook his practice in South Wales to become a novelist, has written a fine book, albeit scathing, about his brethren and the evils of their fee-collecting and splitting ways in his novel *The Citadel*. Somerset Maugham is perhaps the wealthiest and most famous living doctor in both faculties. His first novel after graduating from St. Thomas Hospital was a story of his experience there, and recommended reading for all of you, *Liza of Lambeth*. It was his clinical and objective observation that has made him such a fine writer. I can see this more clearly in his works than in any other. Nowhere else in literature have writers been shown up as the poor forked creatures they are when they seek the bitch goddess Success, as they have in his classic novel *Cakes and Ale*.

I only knew S. Weir Mitchell as a novelist famous in the early years of this century until I found his name raised in honor as a doctor of medicine in the Library of the Mayo Clinic, and this shows what I have been saying before, that in a way this talk will never end, for as soon as I gave it in the Mayo Foundation House Dr. Donald Balfour gave me another one, and Dr. Howard Rome, yet another, so it goes. . . .

Ernest Jones of my own school in Cardiff has written the monumental biography of Sigmund Freud. Sir William Osler was a man of letters as well as medicine as his library at McGill University shows; his biography by Harvey Cushing won the Pulitzer Prize. Clemenceau, the Tiger of France who followed in the wake of the armies of Ulysses Grant and wrote dispatches here, was a doctor of medicine and a writer of renown before he took up the cudgel of politics to beat back the hated Germans from his beloved France. In Russia the short story really began to get underway by the man who was hailed as master by none less than James Joyce, an M.D., and by Katherine Mansfield who died at the hands of quacks. (A nightmare to read is the death of Katherine Mansfield, indeed her life also.) C. B. Flood, a rising novelist and critic from Harvard, said recently that American writers really bypassed England and owe all their art and craft of the short story to the Russians, to Anton Tchecov. He, who described the bourgeois situation in *The Cherry Orchard* and *Uncle Vanya* so clearly that it might have taken place in the Middle West, took his degree in medicine from Moscow University and benefited his country greatly during the cholera epidemics of the 1890's in his holy Russia. Axel Munthe was another physician who told many a tale, some of them incredible and,

more than that, untrue, in his well-nigh everlasting best seller based on Capri, *The Story of San Michele*. Halliday Sutherland, in *Arches of the Years*, is another of them, a real spinner of tales.

In the past publishing season the psychiatrist Karl Stern, whose account of his life in bourgeois pre-Hitler Germany is superb, *Pillar of Fire*, has written a novel about Chicago, *Through Dooms of Love*, that is good enough to be recommended, while Dr. Wilder Penfield of the Neurological Institute of Montreal has followed up his success with a novel on the father of you all, Hippocrates, *The Torch*. I have to mention the novels of Dr. Frank Slaughter if only with a sneer, but for a fine, strong ending I will now sing of the novels of Gabriel Fielding, a renowned M.D. in England who appears to me to be rising like a rocket to literary eminence. His novel upon the roistering of medical students in Dublin, *Through Streets Broad and Narrow*, is part of a trilogy that includes also *In the Time of Greenbloom*, and *Brotherly Love*. This last novel about the apparent failure of an Anglican priest is both moving and lovely. His fourth novel, *Eight Days*, is a spiritual set in North Africa.

So, you see, despite Munthe, Sutherland, and Slaughter, doctors of medicine abound amid the groves of Helicon, and I hope one day to meet them there once again under the sheltering wings of Phoebus Apollo in the land that never was but always will be.